

Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

9 April 2017 – 4pm

Alexander Ullman

Piano

PROGRAMME NOTES *by YCAT*

JS BACH (1685-1750) : Toccata in C minor BWV911 (1714)

JS Bach's reputation is unparalleled. Composing over 1000 known works for different instruments and ensembles such as the iconic Brandenburg concertos, Goldberg Variations and Cello Suites, his music is known for its technical demand and beauty of musical line.

The Toccata in C Minor BWV911 is regarded by many as one of Bach's forgotten treasures, lost amongst his numerous compositions that were written for keyboard.

Composed early in his illustrious career, this Toccata features several different compositional elements that display the full virtuosity of the pianist with both improvisatory and contrapuntal lines. The prelude presents a monophonic opening flourish and descending sequences leading to a build-up of texture and harmony, followed by a deeply expressive Adagio before concluding with a brief Fugue.

BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) : Piano Sonata No. 6 in F, Op. 10 No. 2

Allegro, Allegretto – Presto

The Piano Sonata in F major Op. 10 No. 2 was written in 1797, two years after Beethoven's first public appearance in Vienna. Not only did he appear in many benefit concerts during that time, by the also took part in several pianistic "duels" with other Viennese and visiting virtuosi.

When playing a Beethoven sonata it is important to remember how new and different this music sounded when it was first heard. Op. 10 No. 2 is basically a comedy, set up by the two chords and the throw-away turn at the very beginning. After the development section of the first movement, in which another turn figure refuses to disappear, the music comes to a brief pause, making us

wonder what will happen next. Beethoven teasingly gives us the recapitulation in the wrong key – D major – adding a whole new colour to the mix. But then he sneaks back to the tonic and brings this fun movement to a brilliant close. The second movement is actually a scherzo, though Beethoven did not designate it so. It begins with emphatic chords treading upward ominously from the lower ranges. There is a brief Trio section, joyful and comforting. The finale begins with one of those memorable, frantic humorous themes – seeming to fuse Haydn's mischievousness and Bach's counterpoint, but with an exuberance typical of the young Beethoven. A hint of D major reminds us of his first movement high jinks, before hurtling us to the final unison F .

LISZT (1811-1886) : Transcendental Etude No. 11 : Harmonies du soir, S.139

Après une Lecture de Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata (also known as the Dante Sonata) is a piano sonata in one movement, completed by the Hungarian composer in 1849. It was first published in 1856 as part of the second volume of his *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). This work of program music was inspired by the reading of Dante Alighieri's most famous epic poem, the *Divine Comedy*.

The Dante Sonata was originally a small piece entitled *Fragment after Dante*, consisting of two thematically related movements, which Liszt composed in the late 1830s. He gave the first public performance in Vienna, during November 1839 and when he settled in Weimar in 1849, he revised the work along with others in the volume, and gave it its present title derived from Victor Hugo's own work of the same name. It was published in 1858 as part of *Années de pèlerinage*.

~~~~~ Interval ~~~~~

#### SCHUMANN (1810-1856) : Papillons, Op. 2

Papillons (meaning "Butterflies") is a suite of 12 pieces written by Schumann in 1831, when he was just 21 years old. The suite takes as its influence the romantic writings of Jean Paul, and in particular the final scene of his novel "Flegeljahre" ("The Awkward Age"). Some years later, Schumann was to declare to a friend that Jean Paul's work was one of the greatest inspirations across his entire oeuvre. The original scene depicts a masked ball, an

environment that lends itself easily to Schumann's development into a succession of kaleidoscopic dances. Nowhere else in Schumann's music is the influence of Schubert more dominant, indeed, the suite is decorated throughout with Schubertian waltzes and polonaises. Repeated notes in the final piece are suggestive of a striking clock signifying the end of the ball.

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## **STRAVINSKY (1882-1971) : Three transcriptions from “The Firebird” (trans. Guido Agosti, 1928)**

1. Danse infernale
2. Berceuse
3. Finale

Stravinsky’s “Firebird” is undoubtedly one of the most striking and celebrated orchestral works of the twentieth century. Commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev, leader of the Ballet Russes, the work was premiered on 25 June 1910 to tremendous acclaim, and propelled Stravinsky’s status from unknown composer to celebrity. Diaghilev went on

to commission two more of Stravinsky’s masterworks : “Petrushka” in 1911 and “The Rite of Spring” in 1913.

Guido Agosti’s piano transcription of the final three movements follows on from several concert versions made by the composer of the original ballet score. Completed in 1928, this arrangement provides the performer with great scope for pianistic virtuosity and colour, inspired by Stravinsky’s masterful orchestration in the original score.

## **TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893) : The Nutcracker Piano Suite (trans. Michael Pletnev 1978)**

1. March
2. Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy
3. Tarantella
4. Intermezzo (Journey through the snow)
5. Russian Trepak
6. Chinese Dance
7. Pas de Deux (Andante Maestoso)

Despite standing tall in today’s repertory, when Tchaikovsky’s ballet “The Nutcracker” (based on ETA Hoffmann’s “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King”, via an adaptation by Alexander Dumas) was premiered in December 1892, it was not an especially notable success. The 20-minute suite that Tchaikovsky extracted from the ballet, however, received a far more favourable reception

at its first performance, with almost every one of its eight numbers encores. Now, both the complete ballet score and the concert suite are well-established stalwarts of the classical stage.

The Russian pianist and conductor Mikhail Pletnev transcribed and recorded his own virtuosic transcription of the concert suite for piano solo almost a century later, in 1978, after winning First Prize at the Tchaikovsky International Competition in Moscow. Pletnev is no stranger to Russian ballet music, having also transcribed Tchaikovsky’s “The Sleeping Beauty” and Prokofiev’s “Cinderella”, and his arrangement here mirrors magnificently Tchaikovsky’s tactile and vivid orchestral writing.

## **ARTIST BIOGRAPHY**

**ALEXANDER ULLMAN.** Born in 1991 in London, Alexander studied at the Purcell School, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and the Royal College of Music, where he is completing his Artist Diploma as the Benjamin Britten Piano Fellow (awarded by The Philip Loubser Foundation).

In 2011 Alexander won 1<sup>st</sup> Prize at the Liszt competition in Budapest. He was selected for representation by Young Classical Artist Trust (YCAT) in 2014. Alexander has given concerts across Europe, Asia and America, highlights including recitals at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Teatro Ghione (Rome), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Copenhagen), Archive Nationales (Paris), Auditorio de la Diputacion de Alicante, Shanghai Oriental Arts Centre, Beijing NCPA and La Jolla Arts Festival (California). He has collaborated with the Dover Quartet and cellist Michael Petrov.

This season Alexander returns to the Wigmore Hall, gives recitals in the Nottingham and SJE Arts International Piano Series and Perth Concert Hall, and makes his debuts with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Manchester Camerata. Further afield he tours throughout Argentina, Colombia and China, and takes part in the Chopin Festival in Majorca.

During his studies Alexander won numerous awards including 1<sup>st</sup> Prize at Lagny-sur-Marne International Competition (2013), the Tunbridge Wells International Young Concert Artists Competition (2012) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize at the Isidor Bajic Memorial International Competition (2014).

**Our next concert will be on Sunday 23 April at 4 pm. and will be given by  
JESS GILLAM (saxophone), who was a finalist in the BBC Young Musician 2016 competition.**

**We also hope that you will join us for our final concert on 7 May**